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## WHATEVER HAPPENED TO COUNCILLORS? PROBLEMATISING THE DEFICIENCY NARRATIVE IN ENGLISH LOCAL POLITICS

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Abstract:	<p>Calls for councillors to change are nothing new, even from staunch defenders of local democracy. But one critical question has been sidestepped: Why have councillors been persistently constructed as a 'problem' for local government? This paper draws upon Foucault to detect the emergence and sedimentation of an overriding problematisation of councillors. Our genealogical analysis of a range of public commissions and inquiries, policy documents and academic discourses reveals a 'deficiency narrative', forged during the managerialist turn in the 1960s and subsequently reframed in the 1990s and 2000s through the lens of community leadership. We show that the exclusions and methodological limits of this imaginary blinker studies of councillors, leaving an unhelpfully normative stance within local government studies. Such deficits also lead to a 'smoothing out' of the complexity of local politics, downplay local dynamics and political work, and miss important insights into the practices of local democracy.</p>

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**WHATEVER HAPPENED TO COUNCILLORS? PROBLEMATISING THE  
DEFICIENCY NARRATIVE IN ENGLISH LOCAL POLITICS<sup>1</sup>**

In an age marked by austerity and public spending cuts, often directed at the local state, councillors have become the target of competing pressures and demands. They have been urged to adopt new positions and behaviours to meet shifting patterns of service delivery, evolving community needs and changing institutional landscapes. Of course, these demands are not new. For many years there has been sustained debate about the roles and role orientations of councillors, both within the field of local government studies and the wider public domain. Over time, various institutional redesigns of the office of the councillor have mirrored the twists and turns of local government reorganisations.

However, in our view, such interventions and public deliberations have tended to sidestep one critical question: *Why and how have councillors been persistently constructed as a ‘problem’ for local government?* Drawing on Foucault’s method of problematization, our answer to this question focusses on the emergence and crystallisation of a series of problematisations of councillors in different conjunctures during the past fifty years. Our genealogical analysis detects a ‘deficiency narrative’, which was forged during the managerialist turn in the 1960s, and then reframed in the late 1990s and early 2000s through the lens of community leadership. We show that the exclusions and methodological limits of this collective social imaginary blinkers

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<sup>1</sup> We would like to thank Andrew Hindmoor and four anonymous reviewers for their constructive comments and engagement with our work, as well as their helpful suggestions in the development of our arguments.

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3 studies of councillors, pointing to an unhelpfully normative stance within local  
4 government studies. We also argue that such limitations result in a ‘smoothing out’ of  
5 the complexity of local politics, while downplaying local dynamics and political  
6 activity, so that we miss important insights into the practices of local democracy. We  
7 conclude by calling for a new agenda in the study of - and approach to - the work of  
8 councillors.

## 19 20 **THE ARGUMENT**

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24 Our argument is developed in three steps. We first stress that our objects of inquiry  
25 are discursively constructed, so that the practice of problematisation is the necessary  
26 starting-point of any critical explanation (Glynos and Howarth, 2007). Drawing on  
27 Foucault, we show how his idea of problematisation is an effective research strategy  
28 for unearthing and challenging the fundamental assumptions of different fields of  
29 study. Problematisation thus allows us to contest particular accounts produced in a  
30 discipline, while questioning how a specific object of study has been forged in a  
31 particular context.

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44 Secondly, we investigate and distil the dominant problematisations of the office of the  
45 councillor. Here we focus mainly on the official policy discourses, public inquiries,  
46 and reports from expert committees; when taken together, as Ashforth argues, such  
47 problematisations are concerned, not only ‘with the making of substantively true  
48 propositions about material and social reality’, but also about ‘elaborating practical  
49 means to achieve specific ends within the context of that reality’ (Ashforth, 2014, p.

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8). In the context of English local government, we describe the way that existing representations of councillors and their work depict them as suffering from the ‘wrong’ personal attributes, the lack of managerial skills, political shortcomings, and so forth. In this picture, councillors are invariably seen as behind the times, overtaken by events, and resistant to attempts to get them to professionalize or ‘modernise’. In both academic discourses and government policy, we argue that such problematisations are intimately connected with – and shaped by - what we call a ‘deficiency narrative’, which emerged during the managerialist turn in the 1960s and 1970s, and was sedimented in the 1980s and 1990s.

This deficiency narrative serves to reframe deeply embedded attacks on the personal qualities of councillors, thus connecting their shortcomings to the administrative and service delivery challenges facing councils. Indeed, the ‘failings’ of councillors were crucial in the drive to improve the performance of local government and subsequent proposals to address this entrenched imaginary. Functioning as a horizon for understanding the role of local councillors, a further discursive transformation occurred during the late 1980s and 1990s, as demands for democratic renewal were gradually incorporated into the deficiency narrative through the rhetoric of community leadership. Here the new rhetoric created equivalences between democratic renewal, community leadership, new forms of management, and the perceived inadequacies of local councillors. Opposition to the deficiency narrative was thus negated and incorporated, because demands for democratic renewal were increasingly reframed through the normative characterisation of councillors and parties as obstacles to reform. Such discourses sought to ‘fix’ councillors, while focussing attention on how councillors may become ‘better’.

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5 Thirdly, we expose the limits and exclusions of this deficiency narrative - and the  
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7 problematisations it has partly shaped - thus foregrounding how it has clouded various  
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9 studies of councillors. We argue that it has also yielded overly normative inquiries,  
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11 which fail to grasp the inherent messiness of politics, as well as the practices of  
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13 political work. Inquiry into the activities of councillors is thus occluded. Indeed, the  
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15 narrative defines local councillors as part of the 'problem' facing local government,  
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17 while its normative focus on the roles and categories of councillors contributes to  
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19 their being overlooked in explanations of local political change. In elaborating our  
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21 argument, we begin with the concept of problematisation.  
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## 28 29 **THE METHOD OF PROBLEMATISATION**

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33 Foucault develops the idea of problematisation as a method to capture the way a  
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35 puzzle or anomaly (in phenomena or in theory) is registered and explored in the  
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37 domain of thought. The practice of problematisation involves 'a movement of critical  
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39 analysis in which one tries to see how the different solutions to a problem have been  
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41 constructed; but also how these different solutions result from a specific form of  
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43 problematisation' (Foucault, 1997, pp. 118–9). It begins with pressing and unsettling  
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45 issues in the present, which then elicit thought and critical engagement. It then  
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47 involves the mobilization of Foucault's archaeological and genealogical modes of  
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The archaeological component brackets the causal determinations and conditions that constitute a phenomenon, so that its particular identity can be discerned and described. This involves laying-bare the *rules* that enable the discursive construction of the forms that are investigated. The genealogical dimension is then employed to explore the historical emergence of the investigated phenomenon, where emphasis is placed on its ‘descent’ – the evolution of an identity in a field of contingent events - coupled with the different political struggles and relations of domination that shaped its trajectory (Foucault, 1984a, pp. 81-3).

Foucault’s motivated genealogies destabilise narratives that present a simple continuity where none actually exists. Yet he also interrupts apparently clear-cut breaks, which separate a ‘backward’ or problematic ‘pre-historical’ past from a new beginning, so that past injustices or outmoded beliefs are erased. Instead, Foucault uses his historical sensibility to discern subtle rhetorical redescrptions, linguistic changes and power relations to expose false continuities *or* misleading discontinuities in dominant or taken-for-granted narratives. Events and practices can be viewed in their appropriate perspective (Foucault, 1984a, pp. 81-83).

In this practice of critical reflection, the researcher not only identifies the different problems and solutions that exist - for example, the redesign of the office of the councillor - but also uncovers the conditions that enable such strategies to co-exist simultaneously. Problematisation thus discloses ‘the point in which their simultaneity is rooted; it is the soil that can nourish them all in their diversity and sometimes in spite of their contradictions’ (Foucault, 1984b, p. 389). So when Foucault speaks of writing a ‘history of the present’ his goal is to examine the contingent emergence of a

particular identity or form that is encountered in our current practices, where the task is to extricate the 'lowly origins' and the complex 'play of dominations' that produced it.

As an analytical tool, Foucault's genealogical approach thus focusses on the role of power relations and logics of exclusion in determining discourses, institutional rules and systems, as well as the different roles, subject positions and identities that individuals can occupy in those systems. His method investigates the rhetorical operations that frame institutions and agents in particular ways, allowing us to show how rhetoric makes it possible for institutions to be reinforced or changed in line with competing discourses. Importantly, genealogy is concerned to map out the intricate linkages between different forms of scientific knowledge and academic expertise, on the one hand, and the exercise of power over particular institutional forms and the roles they define on the other. Potential and actual resistances to such projects are also highlighted. Excavating the role of power, rhetoric and the clash of forces that are complicit with the formation and transfiguration of a phenomenon can also show possibilities that are excluded by the dominant narratives. This genealogical accounting of a problem and its ensuing identity thus lays bare excluded possibilities, which can in turn form the basis for alternative problematisations and projects.

## **PROBLEMATISING THE PROBLEMATISATIONS: COUNCILLORS AS COMMUNITY LEADERS**

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Our ‘history of the present’ begins with the current problematisation of councillors as community leaders from the 2010 coalition government onwards. The roots of this problematisation stretch back to the late 1990s and early 2000s, when it was broached and then embedded by successive New Labour governments. Since 2010, there has been no challenge to its dominance. Indeed, in the face of waning government interest in the top-down redesign of the office of the councillor, the model of community leadership continues to be actively promoted by councils, practitioners and think tanks alike, not least the Local Government Association (LGA) (see LGA, 2018). Calls for ‘more community focussed’ councillors repeatedly associate such roles with the need ‘to have high, performing councillors’ (CLG Select Committee, 2013, p. 42). In so doing, they fuse together at least three ‘problems’, which have permeated the everyday discourses of local government (CLG Select Committee, 2013, p. 42; LGiU, 2013; Parker and Smith, 2013; Puleston, 2013, p. 38; Shafique, Kippin and Lucas, 2012; LGA, 2017). These are the problems of: (1) democratic representation, which is perceived to be the bedrock of councillor legitimacy; (2) the appropriate role of councillors within networks and partnerships; and (3) the attitudes and behaviours of councillors. We consider each in turn.

*1. Democratic Representation*

In this problematisation, it is claimed that in the contemporary era of ‘anti-politics’, political disengagement and declining turnouts (Hay, 2007), the primacy of councillors as elected representatives of geographically-defined localities has been increasingly brought into question, as ‘their’ democratic legitimacy is challenged by the emergence of competing deliberative and participatory ‘post-elected’ forms of representation (Pycock, 2017). For some, the upshot is that continued investment in



‘traditional’ representative roles is the equivalent of ‘flogging a dead horse’ (Richardson, 2012). In this context, political party loyalties and declining memberships are perceived to be part of a growing democratic deficit. Repeated concerns are thus voiced that councillors remain wedded to an out-dated form of adversarial and tribal politics, which is unsuited to citizen engagement and empowerment (Copus, 2010). Such sentiments are encapsulated, for example, in the Minister for Housing, Communities and Local Government’s call for councils to be ‘practical and pragmatic, not doctrinaire’ (Clark, 2016). Typically, they are materialised in training programmes for councillors, which foreground the need for ‘political aspects’ to be ‘left’ in the Town Hall, if a councillor ‘is to adequately and successfully build their relationship, work and reputation with the whole community they have been elected to serve, not just their political supporters’ (LGIU, 2018).

## 2. *The Growth of Networks*

Pressures associated with democratic representation are seen to be related to - and compounded by - problems associated with the growth of partnerships and networks. Distributed governance has left councillors as just one player in a complex system of local governance, requiring them to invest in new skills, while taking-up new ‘non-traditional’ externally-facing roles. Here, they must represent and negotiate competing demands of the council, place, party and ward in networks and complex governance arrangements, while ensuring their democratic ‘anchoring’ (Copus, 2016). Indeed, in response to the Kerslake review of its management structures, Birmingham Council advanced the need for ward councillors to refocus on shaping and leading their local area through influence, representation, and independent challenge and scrutiny of public services (2015, p. 6).

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To fulfil such expectations, councillors are also required to adjust to changed societal expectations and modes of service delivery, where citizens demand more ‘connected’ councils which offer more engagement in the delivery of services. Networks are thus said to necessitate a move from hard to soft power (Mulgan, 2012), as well as privileging local knowledge and practices of co-production, in which citizens do more of the ‘heavy lifting’ themselves (Carr-West, 2013), while councillors are required to adopt more ‘relational’ and facilitative roles (Bussu and Galanti, 2018). As Howe (2013, p.14) puts it, ‘this is good for democracy, but only if democracy ... and democratic actors [councillors] evolve and adjust to these changes.’

3. *Questioning Attitudes and Behaviour*

The injunction to ‘evolve’ also evokes the third ‘problem’ underpinning current problematisations. Here it is alleged that while changes in the external environment have been largely imposed on councillors, leaving them out of step with shifting political and social demands, the failure to respond to these changes can be explained in part by their intractable attitudes. Despite years of cajoling and reform, their alleged stubbornness and opposition to change is conceptualised as a prime reason for the failure of local government reforms (Lepine and Sullivan, 2010; Copus 2010). This well-documented irritation that councillors refuse to budge is often inflected with a strong normative dimension: resistance by councillors is associated with the pursuit of ‘less honourable’ goals, self-preservation and short-term interests, particularly as the party remains the key focus of councillor loyalty. In other words, councillors ‘tend to display a lukewarm, unenthusiastic attitude towards many participation mechanisms’ (Sweeting and Copus, 2013: 121).

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5 In fact, the ‘localist’ rhetoric of the Coalition and Conservative governments  
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7 demanded a change in the behaviours and orientations of councillors. Addressing the  
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9 Local Government Association (LGA) in 2011, Eric Pickles, then Secretary of State  
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11 for Communities and Local Government, urged councillors to step up to the  
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13 challenges of reduced budgets and new freedoms. He derided the established statutory  
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15 duties of councils as a ‘comfort blanket’, reminding delegates that ‘our communities  
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17 are looking to you to be their champions’ (Pickles, 2011). Speaking to the same  
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19 conference seven years later, Sajid Javid, then Minister for Housing, Communities  
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21 and Local Government, went so far as to identify a propensity amongst councillors to  
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23 operate in ‘comforting shadows, behind closed doors’ as contributory factor in the  
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25 Grenfell Tower disaster (Javid, 2017). Advocating such behavioural change has been  
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27 regularly coupled with the need to recruit new ‘talent’ to stand for election. For  
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29 example, speaking before the publication of the Localism Bill in 2011, the Minister of  
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31 State for Housing and Local Government, Grant Shapps (2010), declared that ‘we  
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33 need talented people who can seize the opportunities this seismic shift in the balance  
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35 of power presents. So my message to school gate mums and dads and other  
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37 community champions is clear. Your Community Needs You.’  
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#### 46 **THE ‘IGNOBLE’ ORIGINS OF A ‘DEFICIENCY NARRATIVE’**

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50 The current problematisations of councillors assemble a series of inter-related  
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52 deficiencies in personal capabilities and attitudes, as well as perceived social and  
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54 political changes, to redesign the role of the councillor as a community leader. What  
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brings these elements together is the construction of the office of the councillor as one that needs ‘fixing’, or even sidelining. Councillors are exhorted to recognise the undesirability of political conflict, and the necessity for consensus. They are called upon ‘to put aside [...] political differences and work together to engage the public in a great debate about the future shape of their communities and the role of local government’ (Parker, 2013). For executive councillors, increasingly engaged in networks that extend beyond the council, this involves adopting the role of a metagovernor and various practices designed to create a ‘post-ideological consensus’ at a strategic level. For ‘backbench’ councillors, such community leadership is to be exercised in individual wards, engaging local communities to identify needs and shape service delivery; thus ‘finding’ a role for backbench councillors who increasingly believe that they exercise little influence over decision-making (APSE, 2014).

Yet such problematisations of councillors are not new (Copus, 2016, p.1). For more than five decades, government white papers, select committee and expert inquiries, not to mention think-tank reports and sundry media representations, have questioned the perceived inadequacies of councillors, either through institutional reforms, or through exhortations to change behaviour through processes of socialisation and training. Although it is tempting to search for the pristine origins of this ‘deficiency narrative’, our genealogical approach, inspired as it is by Foucault, cautions against this desire. Instead, we shall simply pierce a point in time - the cycle of interventions that sought to ‘fix’ the office of the councillor from the mid-1960s onwards – while accepting that this analysis taps into deeper roots and longer-standing lamentations about the poor quality of councillors (Chandler, 2007).

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5 In a typical characterization voiced in 1948, Hasluck lamented ‘the illiterate babblings  
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7 of local worthies’ found in council meetings, and such statements can easily be  
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9 multiplied (Gyford, Leach and Game, 1989, p. 39). But, despite these intermittent  
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11 interventions about the ‘quality’ of councillors, the *aptitudes* and *skills* of councillors  
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13 were not considered before the 1960s to be fundamental problems associated with  
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15 local government. Rather, from the 1930s onward, there were increasing calls for the  
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17 ‘modernisation’ of councils in line with the latest managerial thinking, which  
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19 stemmed from the ‘administrative efficiency’ movement. These interventions tended  
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21 to concentrate more on issues of organisational structure, coordination and the skills  
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23 and roles of officers (Stewart, 1985; Chandler, 2007).  
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29 The post-war period saw Labour and Conservative governments instigate various  
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31 investigations, predicated on the increasingly prevalent view that there were too many  
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33 councils of too small a size, which were poorly equipped to deal with the increasingly  
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35 technocratic, strategic and welfare service delivery requirements. The need for more  
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37 executive cohesion in local government had been stressed as early as the 1940s  
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39 (Collinge, 1997, p. 352). But it was not until the reform of London Government in  
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41 1963 that these concerns began to be addressed comprehensively via the creation of  
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43 fewer and larger councils, in what Hebbert (2008, p.30) describes as ‘triumph of  
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45 public administration over politics’. Over the years, the ‘problem’ of administration  
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47 had become the ‘problem’ of management. Yet, despite the changing language, there  
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49 was a pervasive continuity in the identification of the central issue.  
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By the mid-1960s, however, it was clear that the separation of the managerial problem from the ‘quality’ of councillors could no longer be maintained as perceptions of councillors - and the expectations of them – began to evolve. The 1960 Herbert Commission report on London government concluded that administrative efficiency and the demands of a ‘healthy local democracy’ required councillors of a ‘high standard of intelligence, experience, personality and character’, who were ‘devoted to the public interest in a disinterested way’ (quoted in MacIntosh, 1962, p.241). At the same time, Lee’s (1963) study of Cheshire County Council identified a new generation of councillors – so-called ‘public persons’ - who were confident of working and socializing alongside professional officers. Indeed, in the 1960s, a cohort of charismatic leaders emerged, who seemed to possess the right mix of political and managerial skills (exemplified at one time, perhaps, by T. Dan Smith, council leader in Newcastle).

Demands for councillors to develop managerial skills gained further traction in the shifting context of local politics. Throughout the twentieth century, the growing size of local government, increasingly charged with the delivery of the goods and services provided by the welfare state, led to a ‘nationalisation’ of local politics. This logic gathered pace in the 1960s and 1970s and resulted in the majority of councillors being elected on party labels. Despite evidence to the contrary, this politicisation prompted a growing unease that the increasing influence of party politics in local elections was leading to the election of more working-class and less formally well-educated councillors, often at the expense of ‘local notables’ (Clement, 1969; Chandler, 2007). Dame Edith Sharpe thus noted in 1962 that she did not think that ‘enough people from business, from industry, from agriculture and the professions’ were entering local

government (cited in Chandler, 2007, p. 232). On the other hand, local government had become 'big business' - now a key deliverer of welfare - with council leaders viewed as key strategic players. In-depth studies of local councils (Jones, 1969) identified the key role of leading councillors and their changing relationships with professional officials. These shifting conditions, rules and interventions made possible, and cemented, calls to tie the 'modernisation' of local government to that of councillor roles.

## **PRODUCING THE MANAGERIAL COUNCILLOR**

By the time of the deliberations of the Redcliffe-Maud Commission (1966-69) and the report of the Maud Committee on the Management of Local Government (1967), the professionalisation and managerialisation of local councillors, alongside an increase in the size and scale of local authorities, was thus seen to be the key in meeting the challenges of party dominance and the increasing scale of welfare services. Such challenges were anchored in the problematization that councillors either lacked managerial skills, which would be redefined in subsequent decades, or that councillor roles and council structures did not allow the necessary scope for these skills to flourish. Indeed, the Redcliffe-Maud Commission (1969), the Wheatley Commission in Scotland (1969), the Maud Committee (1967) and the Bains Report (1972), all focused on the requirement for more rational planning, which, to some extent, had already been developing in cities such as Newcastle, Liverpool, Stockport and Hull (Chandler, 2007, p. 221). For example, the internal management system introduced in Newcastle in the early 1960s was widely seen as an innovative response to the

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demands of ‘modern’ decision-making. In 1965, the council leader, T. Dan Smith, spoke of the introduction of a City Cabinet and City Manager, and noted the urgent need to ‘modernise’, expressing the view that ‘only democracy with efficiency will lead Britain forward’ (1965, p. 417).

Together with greater allowances for key position holders, and an added clarity and enhanced status for important leadership roles, it was argued that the requisite managerial and professional skills should now be nurtured in councillors (and not only officers). Redcliffe-Maud (1967, p. 351) thus noted the need to ‘get people of the right calibre for local government in the future’, highlighting an expectation that the larger authorities proposed by his Commission (and later those less large ones that were created by the 1972 Local Government Act), would, in light of their increased size and importance, attract a better standard of councillor, which Maud felt would increasingly come from ‘the Universities’ (p. 352). Peter Walker, Shadow Minister for Housing and Local Government, also argued along these lines (see Young and Rao, 1997).

In fact, the Maud Committee was critical of the committee system for discouraging the recruitment of ‘policy orientated’ councillors. It recommended the creation of executive management boards with the ‘residual’ councillors, reduced in number, performing a scrutiny role. Such suggestions were ‘presented as a means of finding attractive opportunities for able people’ (Young and Rao, 1997, p. 221). They were rearticulated in the conclusions of the Redcliffe-Maud Commission which stressed the need for fewer committees, as they encouraged councillors to focus on ‘detail’, in favour of a ‘central vantage point’ supported by ‘new and more sophisticated



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3 techniques of management' (Redcliffe-Maud, 1969, p.125). The then Labour  
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5 Government supported such demands, stating that larger councils would mean  
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7 councillors spending less time on detail 'than was appropriate in modern conditions'  
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9 and that councillors needed to re-orientate themselves more to strategic policy making  
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11 (DLGRP 1970, p.26). Indeed, Jones (1973, p.145) noted that the logic of re-  
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13 organisation would 'demand a higher quality of member ... by making *him* more  
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15 professional, *he* is more likely to make more impact on the public and so increase  
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17 public interest in local government'; there was thus a need to 'create and support a  
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19 class of professional politicians'.  
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24 The Bains Report - the result of a working party looking into internal management  
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26 structures for the new councils created by the 1972 Act - was again concerned that  
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28 certain types of people, 'particularly professionals and businessmen', were unwilling  
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30 to serve as councillors due to the time-consuming nature of committee work and  
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32 detail (Bains, 1972, p. 30). The solution to this dilemma, and the problem of growing  
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34 politicization more generally, was to be found in stronger corporate management led  
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36 by a centralised political leadership and streamlined decision-making procedures. In  
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38 1974, a Department for the Environment consultation paper was able to state with  
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40 confidence that 'current trends in management in local government are liable to  
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42 absorb the individual councillor into the general work of the council to a greater  
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44 extent' (DoE, 1974, p.1) and most councils formally adopted internal structures based  
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46 on Bains after 1972.  
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52 By the late 1960s, then, the required personal qualities of councillors were being  
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54 reframed in terms of the managerial and/or professional skills associated with the  
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corporate planning and coordination then popular in the business world. In an extension of traditional arguments that councillors should pursue the ‘public interest’, leading councillors were thus to become more technocratic, with the ‘managerial’ councillor offered up as a response to the need for local government to respond to its increasing budgetary responsibilities and party political control of decision-making. Stanyer (1971), for example, was quick to point out how questions over the deficiencies of existing councillors were increasingly framed by the uncritical acceptance in governing circles of the ‘systematic selection’ approach of Taylorist scientific management. In this regard, improved organisational outcomes were tied to the recruitment and training of high-performing individuals (1971, p. 77). As such, the ‘managerial’ councillor was a ‘modernised’ re-production of earlier ideal types that stressed the distinction between local politics and administration and reframed the shortcomings of councillors. But, importantly for our analysis, it tied the deficiencies of councillors to the administrative challenges facing local authorities. In so doing, it reshaped the terrain of argumentation, such that the deficiencies of councillors became one of the fundamental lynchpins of the rhetorical charges against ‘under-performing’ local government.

**TOWARDS THE ENTREPRENEURIAL COUNCILLOR**

From the mid-1970s onwards the highly technocratic managerial skills that were understood to be beyond both politics and (it was commonly assumed) the wit of most councillors were supplemented by demands for a different set of skills as the deficit problematisation shifted in line with new developments in managerialist and neo-

1 liberal thinking. During the Thatcher administrations of the 1980s, and then into the  
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3 1990s, with the emergence of New Labour - an era of competitive tendering,  
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5 outsourcing and competition - corporate planning was now constructed as an  
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7 unnecessary overhead. Managerial skills were thus related to the logic of competition  
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9 based on efficiency and contracting skills, with councillors expected to develop  
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11 commercial or 'enabling' functions and capacities.  
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18 In this sense, the 'neo-liberal' councillor required skills that would allow them to  
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20 implement the 'roll back' neo-liberalism associated with new public management, as  
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22 well as the 'retreat' from the post-war welfare state consensus (Peck and Tickell,  
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24 2002). Ironically, the Widdicombe Report (1986) identified the emergence of a group  
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26 of 'higher calibre' councillors in London and the metropolitan councils, who were  
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28 generally better educated and younger than the average councillor. On the face of it,  
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30 this generation of councillors, who emerged in the 1970s and 1980s, possessed the  
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32 qualities which had long been deemed necessary. However, these councillors mainly  
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34 belonged to the 'New Urban Left'; they were ideologically opposed to the  
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36 managerialism of Thatcher governments, and advocated advocating radical  
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38 alternatives (Gyford, 1985). In short, they were still deemed to lack the 'right kind' of  
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40 'responsible' skills articulated within the new dominant problematisation, which was  
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42 increasingly shaped by neo-liberal ideas and values.  
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48 The required managerial skills also drew on revised understandings of 'strategic'  
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50 capabilities. These drew on critiques that suggested councillors spent too much time  
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52 on detail, and that some had gone too far in interfering in the managerial domain of  
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54 officers. For example, the Audit Commission (1990) lamented the amount of time  
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which councillors continued to spend on detail (often with respect to constituency duties relating to individual cases) and recommended separating out the policy making and ‘operational’ roles. These themes were repeated in a report published by a Department of the Environment Working Party in 1993, which inquired again into internal management structures. Reframed through the discourse of new public management, council leaders were now encouraged to focus on strategy, while others got on with the (supposedly) differing task of representing their wards (DoE, 1993).

Successive New Labour governments made such charges against councillors explicit; indeed, they were often amplified. Renewed emphasis was placed on institutional reform and concerted efforts to change the behaviour of councillors via exhortation, training and self-responsibilisation (Hale, 2013). Labour’s ‘modernisation’ agenda thus re-cast the deficits facing councillors in line with a revamped managerialist rhetoric, which stressed transformational leadership and coalition-building skills, but remained favourably predisposed to strong, individual leadership (Leach and Wilson, 2008). Councillors were seen to require a new skill set associated with collaborative working. This model would favour a small, strategic executive core, which would ‘steer, rather than row’, mainly by directing a series of detached, arms-length operational and delivery units. Councillors were deemed to lack the ‘soft skills’ of networking and coalition building, which were now the fundamental competencies for a more fragmented system of local governance.

Fostering this new bundle of competencies went hand in glove with the emergent image of the ‘neo-liberal’ councillor, who was required to negotiate and implement the ‘roll out’ of neo-liberalism (Peck and Tickell, 2002). In this conception,

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3 leadership, networking and individual responsibility became cardinal virtues of the  
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5 new councillor. This movement resonates with Foucault's account of neoliberalism  
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7 (Foucault, 2008). His genealogy of neoliberalism emphasizes the way that this  
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9 discourse comprises a novel series of governmental technologies and rationalities,  
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11 which are designed to influence behaviour and practice via a series of 'technologies of  
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13 the self' in what Rose (1999, p, 456) calls 'a double movement of autonomisation and  
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15 responsibilisation'. In this strategy, endeavours are made to constitute individuals  
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17 with particular assemblages of attributes, which are underpinned by a logic of  
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19 entrepreneurialism. The neo-liberal councillor was thus to be a risk-taker,  
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21 entrepreneur, innovator and facilitator; characteristics that were consistent with the  
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23 now popular 'excellence' school of managerialism, which placed more emphasis on  
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25 cultural controls and 'softer' skills.  
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31 Amidst an explicit and ongoing irritation with councillor 'quality' (Stoker, 2004),  
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33 New Labour used a mixture of direct and indirect approaches to engineer change.  
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35 Indirectly, they employed a range of agencies and interventions aimed at the 'self-  
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37 responsibilisation' of councillors, including training programmes via the  
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39 Improvement and Development Agency, and the apparatus of the Comprehensive  
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41 Performance Assessment, monitored by the Audit Commission, which sought not  
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43 only compliance with the government's agenda, but also particular attitudes and  
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45 dispositions towards it (Barnett, 2003). As Hale (2013) notes, these attempts became  
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47 increasingly prescriptive, as they evolved into the role descriptors, councillor  
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49 contracts and performance reviews which have become common in recent years. In  
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51 2013, the Communities and Local Government Select Committee recommended that  
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53 councillors produce annual self-assessments of their achievements in office (2013, pp.  
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59-61). Echoing the recommendations of the Select Committee, Oldham council also introduced annual performance reports of councillors, together with ‘support functions’ to facilitate the work of councillors, including a Local Leaders Programme (Shafique, Kippen and Lucas, 2012).

More direct interventions sought to address the persistent issue of the clarity of roles through legislation. For the first time, the Local Government Act (2000) created different classes of councillor - executive/cabinet members and backbenchers/scrutineers – with councils given the possibility of having a directly elected Mayor. This increased the profile of leading councillors, but also led to the further marginalisation of the rest (APSE, 2015). At the same time, strategic skills were again seen to be in short supply, particularly the type required for the ‘joined up’ local governance required by introduction of mechanisms such as Local Strategic Partnerships and Community Strategies, which New Labour embraced as part of its discourses of ‘community leadership’ and ‘place shaping’. Councillors were increasingly called upon to ditch outdated party political practices and to adopt a new form of politics, which stressed that they assume the role of ‘a conflict broker’ (James and Cox, 2007: 22).

Developing a theme from the 1998 Modern Local Government White Paper, the idea of community leadership served to articulate new managerial thinking about the importance of vision, leadership and coalition building, effective service delivery through user participation and learning, as well as the agenda for democratic renewal. In so doing, it encapsulated the new role orientations of councillors, which were associated with the logics of ‘roll back’ neoliberalism. Visions of councillors acting as

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3 mini-mayors or champions of neighbourhoods thus emerged in the 2006 White  
4 Paper *Strong and Prosperous Communities*, as well as the LGA's *Closer to People*  
5 and *Places* campaign. Councillors were to act as 'civic entrepreneurs', or, to use the  
6 words of the leader of Hertfordshire County Council, they should become  
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11 'community activists', whose status would be 'one among equals' (Communities and  
12 Local Government Select Committee, 2013, p.9).  
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18 Yet, ironically, this shift to community leadership further embedded the dominant  
19 narrative by pinpointing the deficiencies of councillors in two ways. First, appeals to  
20 community leadership incorporated demands for 'community-orientated' models of  
21 local government in opposition to the Thatcherite 'enabling authority'. These former  
22 models resonated with a conception of local leadership that enabled councillors to  
23 retain control over the political purpose and direction of an authority (Leach *et al.*,  
24 1994; Stewart and Stoker, 1988). But such demands were reframed within the  
25 discourse of community leadership and were thus connected to the problematisations  
26 of the leadership role and the role of the party group. Indeed, attacks on the working  
27 of party groups acted as a proxy within deficiency narratives for an attack on  
28 councillors. Parties were singled out as a cause of constant frustration, charged with  
29 never really fitting into the formality of council business, and creating what Copus  
30 (2004) calls a hidden 'partyocracy'. Leach (2004), a strong advocate of councillors,  
31 thus problematises the continued attachment of councillors to party politics, with such  
32 criticisms serving as a proxy for councillors being out of step with the shifting context  
33 of politics and demands for new forms of post-representative politics.  
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Secondly, community leadership resonated with demands for new types of politics - deliberation and co-production - which arose from increasingly accepted narratives that plotted the shift from local government to local governance through networks and partnerships. Community leadership discourses, often from a perspective of seeking to defend councillors and fit their representative roles into these demands for local democratic renewal, thus continued to draw on a deficiency narrative and could be incorporated within it. For example, John Stewart (2003), consistently one of the staunchest defenders of councillors, in seeking ways to utilise them fully within a community leadership model for local government, drew on the need for councillors to adjust to other types of democratic engagement. In short, opposition to the dominant narrative was confined to the effectiveness and emphases of the reforms rather than the underlying problematisations of councillors (Stoker, 2011). At the same time, community leadership invested communities with democratic legitimacy - and with it many of the roles and responsibilities of councillors - thus paving the way for Cameron's Big Society initiative.

Over time, therefore, the exact nature of the required skills and functions of councillors has changed to suit the central government's reform agenda, including the implementation of both 'roll back' and 'roll out' neoliberalism, and various management fads. However, the deep-seated 'narrative of deficiencies' exudes an embedded logic of continuity, which is evident from Redcliffe-Maud in the 1960s through to the current problematization. Indeed, the underlying rhetoric sustains a mythical narrative of local politics that is repeatedly predicated on the collective investment in the office of the councillor 'to come'. Equally, this overriding problematization ensnares the field of local government studies, and indeed



government policy, in a metaphorical cul-de-sac of its own making. The discourse is thus gripped by a series of logics and perspectives that persistently exclude or downplay the critical examination of the salient challenges facing councillors and local government under conditions of austerity.

### **LOCAL COUNCILLORS AS OBJECTS OF SCIENTIFIC INVESTIGATION: METHODOLOGICAL AND NORMATIVE SELECTIVITIES**

It is an axiomatic feature of Foucault's genealogical approach that power and knowledge are intricately connected in various ways. In *Discipline and Punish*, he urges us to 'abandon a whole tradition that allows us to imagine that knowledge can exist only where the power relations are suspended and that knowledge can develop only outside its injunctions, its demands and its interests' (Foucault, 1977, p. 27). Instead, we 'should admit rather that power produces knowledge (and not simply by encouraging it because it serves power or by applying it because it is useful); that power and knowledge directly imply one another; that there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations.' What Foucault names 'power-knowledge relations' should not be analysed 'on the basis of a subject of knowledge who is or is not free in relation to the power system'; instead, 'the subject who knows, the objects to be known and the modalities of knowledge must be regarded as so many effects of these fundamental implications of power-knowledge and their historical transformations' (Foucault, 1977, pp. 27-8).

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In the final step of our argument, we use the results of our genealogy to challenge the underlying assumptions of the field of local government studies. Here we expose and delineate the limitations of three interconnected research protocols that derive from the deficiency narrative. These relate to: (1) a particular set of methodological and normative commitments; (2) the smoothing out of the complexities of politics with its implications for institutional design; and (3) the limited engagement with political practices.

1. *Analytical and Evaluative Selectivities*

It is striking that the deficit problematisations we have discerned are symbiotically related to a series of analytical deficits and normative biases lodged in the research designs of studies of local councillors (Copus and Wall, 2017; Mangan *et al.*, 2016). Consequently, the study of elected members has migrated towards overly normative inquiries in which their skills and role orientations are evaluated against the backdrop of a pre-defined set of normative principles, institutional designs and behavioural changes, which it is assumed that the office of the councillor ‘to come’ will be required to embody. Studies have thus focussed on the development of categories that prescribe diverse ways of working for councillors. They are thus littered with references to different ‘types’ of councillors, and the multiplicity of roles and subject positions they occupy: ‘representative’, ‘steward’, ‘facilitator’ and ‘advocate’, as well as ‘scrutiniser’ and ‘community leader’.

Typically, such analytical models enable researchers to undertake three tasks: first, they establish the roles of councillors that are deemed to be necessary to meet the demands of changing social and democratic demands; secondly, these roles are

mapped against existing practices, so as to delineate the alleged shortcomings of councillors; finally, a call is made for councillors to take on new roles and behaviours (Kirklees Democracy Commission, 2017; Mangan *et al.*, 2016). Exemplifying this range of roles in their study, the *21st Century Councillor*, Mangan and her colleagues articulate a set of research questions devoted to: the ‘roles that the 21st Century councillor is required to perform’; ‘the competencies and skills that councillors require to undertake these roles’; and the available ‘support and training for these roles’ (Mangan *et al.*, 2016, p. 4). Indeed, the study foregrounds how the ‘roles, skills and relationships [of councillors] are shifting in response to a range of contextual challenges’ (Mangan *et al.*, 2016, p. 24), and concludes that ‘there is a challenge for elected members too to think about how they want to be supported so they can actively engage in shaping the future rather than letting austerity wash over them’ (Mangan *et al.*, 2016, p. 24).

Importantly, deficit problematisations of the office of the councillor have led studies away from the vitally important tasks of critical interpretation. Existing studies thus run the risk of descriptivism, in which they categorize the functions of councillors at the expense of explaining political outcomes and the dominance of specific practices. In fact, such overly normative inquiries, often driven by a set of principled engagements in support of local democracy, can take a broad brush to the analysis and evaluation of particular exercises of power and domination. For example, aside from a few notable exceptions (Allen, 2013; Barron *et al.*, 1991), gender and power imbalances within accounts of local councillors are often rendered ‘invisible’ or focussed on questions of representation (Rao, 2005).

2. *Smoothing out the Complexities of Politics*

What we have characterised as overly normative enquiries into the roles and categories of councillors are often rooted in understandings of politics which emphasize practices of consensus-building. Discourses inciting councillors to assume the subject positions of ‘community leaders’ or ‘facilitators’, which emerge and are articulated within the deficiency narrative, thus generate normative demands for councillors to embrace new deliberative or communicative ways of working. Such calls place responsibility on elected members to resolve clashes between local representative and participatory democracy, as well as to meet increasing demands from service-users for more engagement and flexibility in local provision (see our discussion above; Carr-West, 2013; Lepine and Sullivan, 2010; Sweeting and Copus, 2013). But, at the same time, such discourses are also critical of the capacity of councillors to address such demands, blaming their embedded behaviours and attitudes for the failings and fragmentation of local democratic governance. Here, councillors’ allegiances to party politics are constructed as a barrier to change, with councillors ‘seen as outdated elements in a system that has moved on, and they are simply behind the times, in the main unable or unwilling to take on the broader aspects of democratisation in local politics’ (Sweeting and Copus, 2012, p. 32).

By privileging consensual politics, such analyses function as a condition of possibility for the reiteration of deficit problematisations. This is because they typically associate conflict, and the inherent heterogeneity and multi-dimensional character of political practices, with the failings of councillors. For one thing, the shortcomings of councillors are highlighted in order to explain the failure to resolve local conflicts and tensions. The lack of ‘fit’ between, on the one hand, their existing skills and, on the

other hand, their 'stubborn adherence' to traditional modes of representation (Copus, 2010, p. 588) are identified as key barriers to change. The result is that political tensions and paradoxes, which are integral to the practices of elected members, become indicators of the failings of local politicians. In turn, this leads to calls for the construction of 'responsible' and 'enlightened' councillors, who are willing to leave behind outmoded forms of engagement in favour of deliberative and communicative principles. Indeed, even those rare accounts which shy away from blaming councillors for the failings of local democracy, while recognising the complexity and contingency of politics, still look to councillors to display a revised political sensibility and perform as facilitators of conflict resolution. For example, Lepine and Sullivan (2010, p.105) conclude that in order to forge new patterns of democracy 'we have to start somewhere – why not with the local councillor as a harbinger of grown up politics?'

However, in this argumentative process, and as conflicts and tensions across localities become synonymous with the deficits of local councillors, the critical examination of political practices in the major studies of elected members and the workings of local government is subsumed or marginalised. Consider, for example, the recent discourses on community leadership in which councillors are repositioned as 'community facilitators'. Such new subject positions are often advanced as opening up new responsibilities for communities and councillors, while generating new spaces of representation and participation. Yet such opportunities are too often seen to be constrained by frequent appeals to the individual failings of local councillors, which are then corrected by institutional 'fixes' to the office of the councillor. Too frequently, proposed changes are thus married to an inadequate consideration of what forms of practical politics can advance new forms of community leadership, while

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simultaneously advancing utopian notions of depoliticisation, as councillors ‘of the future move to play a supportive rather than an unnecessarily antagonistic role’ (Copestake, 2011, p. 50).

So, framed through the dominant deficit problematisations, there is little consideration of the essentially contested nature of politics. Instead, the failings of councillors operate as the explanation of why community leadership roles have not been taken up as anticipated or embedded. Blame is thus put on councillors. Indeed, as Richardson notes, ‘if alternative roles [community leadership] for local members are not working, then one answer would be to have fewer members’, although she goes on to suggest that ‘the way forward for local government is [perhaps] to welcome a wider range of forms of representation’ (Richardson, 2012, p. 34). In short, there is a danger that concerns about the lack of ‘fit’ between councillors’ skills and adherence to representative modes of accountability and engagement, masks assumptions about the desirability of both political conflict and consensus, which militates against the lived experience of councillors and their understandings of political work (APSE, 2015).

3. *Limited Engagement with Political Practice*

The failure to acknowledge the political nature of many of their activities leads us to the third of our interconnected concerns, namely, that it resonates with a top-down institutional orientation, which underplays the significance of the everyday practices of local politics and fails to engage with them. As we have argued, deficit problematisations construct councillors as objects of external intervention. Such objectifications militate against the conceptualisation and investigation of their political practices, as well as the need for change to be inscribed into local contexts,

so that the scientific and expert problematisations may work with, and not against, the grain of the lived experience of councillors.

In fact, because the production of much scientific knowledge about councillors is structured by the way that they can be made 'fit for purpose' in particular social and political environments, experts and academics often limit the scope of their research to the use of attitudinal surveys or what might be termed 'time and motion' studies of how councillors engage in specific functions and duties. Typically, they investigate patterns of casework and scrutiny or the hours per week devoted to the duties of the councillor, while collecting from elected members their views and perceptions of changing roles and pressures. Hence they do not examine what Freeman (2015) calls the 'political work' of the councillor, failing to offer a critical and 'thicker' grasp of what it is that councillors 'do' when they 'do politics'. In this respect, the study of Councillors has not pursued lines of enquiry which have become more common in studies of the practices of other actors in local policy arenas, including front-line workers and community activists (Griggs, Norval and Wagenaar, 2014).

An important upshot of these theoretical and methodological constraints is that existing studies fail to explore or prioritise how the role of councillors is necessarily bound up with, and brought into being by, the actually existing practices of local politics. That is to say, existing studies have not taken the councillor 'in operation' as their analytical starting point, which means they take insufficient account of the relational nature of the 'work' of councillors and the way that their everyday practices of assembling or configuring a heterogeneous array of roles, materials, technologies, bodies of expertise and symbolic appeals *constitutes* the very subject-position and

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lifeworld of ‘the councillor’. And this lack of attention to developing thick conceptualisations of the practices of councillors only serves to reinforce the failure to recognise the essentially political role of councillors. Again, the dominant framing of existing studies does not adequately capture or account for the inevitability of political conflict, but merely exposes and displaces tensions in the exercise of local political work onto attitudes of councillors and institutional fixes.

**CONCLUSIONS: REFRAMING THE STUDY OF COUNCILLORS**

Our article began with a conundrum: why and how are councillors (re)presented as a ‘problem’ for local government? Starting from the perspective that research objects are not immediately given, but fabricated by the practices and situated judgements of researchers, we first characterised the dominant problematisation of councillors. This dominant problematisation represents the office of the councillor - and councillors themselves - as suffering from a series of attitudinal, behavioural and skills deficits. Taken together, such weaknesses and limitations are crystallised into what we have termed a ‘deficiency narrative’.

Framed in these terms, the office of the councillor stands in need of ‘fixing’. It also locks local government studies into a number of overly-determined pathways. Moreover, it leads existing studies away from critical explanation towards normative-led inquiries, which do not offer problem-driven accounts that focus on the explanation of local political outcomes. At the same time, the bias towards normative studies cannot be dissociated from a failure to grasp the inherent clumsiness of politics and the practices of political work. Even more, it has come to define local



councillors as part of the 'problem' facing local government, so that its focus on normative discussions of roles and categories has contributed to councillors becoming neglected in - if not entirely excluded from - explanations of local political change.

Our genealogical narrative demonstrates how the deficiency narrative emerged in the articulation of demands for improved management across local government in the 1960s. At this point, equivalences were drawn between demands for modernisation and the intermittent criticisms of the personal qualities of local elected members, which had been voiced since the 1930s. From the mid-1960s onwards, the linking together of the personal shortcomings of local councillors, on the one hand, and the demands of managerialism, on the other, led to an embedding of the deficit problematisation of local councillors. It also resonated with alternative problematisations of the democratic and service delivery components of local government, while reinforcing moves towards corporate management, contracting out, strategic leadership, the executive cabinet reforms, scrutiny, community leadership, area working and neighbourhood governance. In a spiralling movement, the problematisation was thus reaffirmed by these reforms and the alleged problems underlying them.

Of course, the deficiency narrative was contested. There were strong defences of the 'quality' of councillors based on their knowledge, commitment and skills (Stanyer, 1976). Leading academics - notably George Jones (1973) - defended the 'traditional' committee system against the executive-style management boards suggested by the Maud Committee. There were also weighty attacks on the corporate managerialism of the 1960s and 1970s, with Cockburn (1977) and Dearlove (1979) dismissing it as an

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attempt to de-politicise conflict and reduce the influence of more radical councillors. However, the dominant narrative found staunch support within academic circles, with the influential Institute for Local Government Studies embracing arguments that the corporate approach and larger scales put local government in a better position to defend itself (Glennerster, 1981, p. 39). And, more importantly, over time opposing voices were progressively incorporated into the dominant narrative of the deficiencies of councillors.

What does this imply for the study of councillors and the office of the councillor? One common response to the limitations of a problematic is to call for an opening-up of the field to new theoretical perspectives. However, the arguments marshalled in this article also warn against the potential limitations of such conclusions. In pursuing new avenues of research, studies of local councillors should shift their objects of inquiry towards problem-driven research (Glynos and Howarth, 2007), focusing on what they actually do when they engage in political work (Freeman, 2015). Capturing such practices would also disclose the possibility of exploring rival visions on the ground, while investigating how these excluded pathways might inform bottom-up reforms of local democracy, rather than top-down attempts at institutional design that are based on pre-existing normative commitments.

More importantly, calls for more pluralism do not automatically question the dominant problematisations. Alternative perspectives will not necessarily counter the long-embedded assumptions, concepts, questions and normative-driven principles that have long informed mainstream studies. Challenging such underpinnings is a more difficult exercise, because it needs to dislodge the dominant problematisation of

councillors, as well as its resonance within a chain of problematisations that structure the field of local government studies. It thus requires a careful process of deconstruction that can expose the tensions and contradictions of the underlying assumptions of the dominant narrative, while enabling their critical evaluation and reinscription. Perhaps our intervention can contribute some of the first steps in such a process.

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